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SUBJECT: ESTONIA: PARLIAMENT EXTENDS AFGHANISTAN TROOP
DEPLOYMENT

¶1. (U) On October 22, the 101-member Estonian Parliament (Riigikogu) voted to extend the mandate for the Estonian troop deployment in Afghanistan by 12 months (until December 31, 2009). Estonia troops are embedded with British units in the Helmand province of southern Afghanistan. The current mandate (valid until December 31, 2008) allows Estonia to contribute as many as 150 defense force members to the ISAF mission. The new mandate increases the number of troops authorized to participate in the mission to ¶170. The bill passed Parliament with a majority of 59 votes in favor and no votes opposing. MPs from two of the three members of the governing coalition, Reform Party and Social Democratic party, overwhelmingly voted in favor of extending the mandate. However, only half of the members of IRL (the remaining coalition member and the party of the Minister of Defense) and 13 members of the primary opposition Center Party, voted in favor of the bill. Altogether, 30 MPs (primarily members of opposition parties) did not vote at all. In 2007, the extension of the Afghanistan mandate passed with 69 votes in favor and none opposed.

¶2. (U) Afghanistan is one of Estonia's highest foreign policy priorities. Estonian troops have served in southern Afghanistan since 2002. There are currently 140 Estonian soldiers deployed in Helmand (the epicenter of Afghanistan's opium production and a stronghold for the Taliban). The primary unit is a mechanized infantry company and a mortar platoon. Estonia began providing development assistance to Afghanistan in 2002, donating more than USD 336,000 from 2002-2007 with an emphasis on the health sector. In March 2008, the GOE sent a civilian medical advisor to Helmand to support the development of a sustainable healthcare system in the province and to help coordinate international aid.

PHILLIPS